

# A Full-Spectrum Response to Sharp Power

## The Vulnerabilities and Strengths of Open Societies

by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig



## ABOUT THE SHARP POWER AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE SERIES

As globalization deepens integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies. The Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series is an effort to systematically analyze the ways in which leading authoritarian regimes seek to manipulate the political landscape and censor independent expression within democratic settings, and to highlight potential civil society responses.

This initiative examines emerging issues in four crucial arenas relating to the integrity and vibrancy of democratic systems:

- Challenges to free expression and the integrity of the media and information space;
- Threats to intellectual inquiry;
- Contestation over the principles that govern technology;
- Leverage of state-driven capital for political and often corrosive purposes.

The present era of authoritarian resurgence is taking place during a protracted global democratic downturn that has degraded the confidence of democracies. The leading authoritarians are challenging democracy at the level of ideas, principles, and standards, but only one side seems to be seriously competing in the contest.

Global interdependence has presented complications distinct from those of the Cold War era, which did not afford authoritarian regimes so many opportunities for action within democracies. At home, Beijing, Moscow, and others have used twenty-first-century tools and tactics to reinvigorate censorship and manipulate the media and other independent institutions. Beyond their borders, they utilize educational and cultural initiatives, media outlets, think tanks, private sector initiatives, and other channels of engagement to influence the public sphere for their own purposes, refining their techniques along the way. Such actions increasingly shape intellectual inquiry and the integrity of the media space, as well as affect emerging technologies and the development of norms. Meanwhile, autocrats have utilized their largely hybrid state-capitalist systems to embed themselves in the commerce and economies of democracies in ways that were hardly conceivable in the past.

The new situation requires going beyond the necessary but insufficient tools of legislation, regulation, or other governmental solutions. Democracies possess a critical advantage that authoritarian systems do not—the creativity and solidarity of vibrant civil societies that can help safeguard institutions and reinforce democratic values. Thus, the papers in this series aim to contextualize the nature of sharp power, inventory key authoritarian efforts and domains, and illuminate ideas for nongovernmental action that are essential to strengthening democratic resilience.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Christopher Walker** is vice president for studies and analysis at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. In this capacity, he oversees the department responsible for NED's multifaceted analytical work. He is an expert on authoritarian regimes, and has been at the forefront of the discussion on authoritarian influence on open systems. His articles have appeared in numerous publications, including the *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the *Journal of Democracy*. He is co-editor (with Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner) of the edited volume *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), and co-editor (with Jessica Ludwig) of the report *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (NED's International Forum for Democratic Studies, 2017).

**Jessica Ludwig** is a senior program officer at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, the research and analytical section of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). In this capacity, she serves as editor of the Power 3.0 blog and producer of the Power 3.0 podcast. Her research focuses on authoritarian influence in emerging democracies, with a particular interest in China and Russia's engagement with Latin America. She is coeditor (with Christopher Walker) of the report, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (NED's International Forum for Democratic Studies, 2017). In addition to coordinating various projects and publications that draw on comparative research methods for the International Forum, her writing has been published in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Global Americans*, and the *Journal of Democracy*.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world has changed in the past decade and a half. During this period of democratic downturn, dictatorships have intensified and modernized their repression. Regimes in virtually every region have become more authoritarian. Two major powers in particular, China and Russia, have led the way in tightening their grip domestically, adapting their techniques for a new era, and deploying them to emerge as active and purposeful transnational forces that are able to influence open societies and their institutions.

**There are serious vulnerabilities in a cluster of institutions related to information and ideas, commerce, media, and technology that form the ‘central nervous system’ of modern open societies. Today, such institutions have deep relationships across the autocratic-democratic divide.** Through these conduits and nodes of shared activity, autocratic powers are recalibrating incentives in ways that conflict with standards of democratic accountability. When this critical system is exposed to malign influence, the adverse reverberations can be profound.

Crucially, today more than at any time in recent memory, there are no bright lines between domestic affairs and international influence. As the reports in this Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series indicate, autocracies and democracies have become tethered to one another in complicated ways that, more often than not, have harmful effects on practices and standards in the democracies.

Much of the analysis on authoritarian regimes in recent years has assumed that they would attempt to accrue international influence by attracting and winning over their interlocutors. But the leaders in Beijing and Moscow are unambiguous in their efforts to rule through strength and fear at home, and people in free societies should open their minds to the possibility that these regimes are inclined to do similarly abroad.

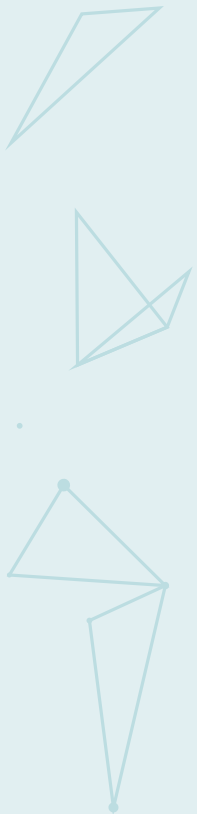
**Episodes that a few years ago could be brushed off as single or random examples of authoritarian overreach are now recognizable as part of a global pattern.** Given the velocity and scope of the changes, and as an outgrowth of its original work on sharp power, the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy undertook **an initiative to assess the ways in which modern forms of authoritarian influence are affecting the democratic infrastructure in open societies.** As globalization has deepened integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies.

## KEY CONTEXT

**An underestimation of the threat.** At the outset of this deeper and wide-ranging engagement between autocracies and democracies, policymakers in the latter grossly underestimated the determination of authoritarian powers and their capacity to alter and reforge international norms and institutions. During a period in which democracies have been preoccupied with their own internal problems, the authoritarian regimes in Russia, China, and other countries have pushed boundaries and successfully exploited the vulnerabilities of democratic systems.








**Authoritarian regimes have strong preferences about the way the world should be ordered and governed.** Autocrats are not agnostic about freedom of expression or association, for example. The organizing principles of these systems require the control of speech and ideas and the elimination of independent groupings or power centers in society.

**Democracies must “get their own house in order” but cannot ignore the world around them while they do so.** The authoritarian regimes that have taken advantage of their interactions with democratic countries and international rules-setting bodies are not likely to retreat or hit a pause button as democracies tend to domestic difficulties. Efforts by democracies to mend internal weaknesses and protect their institutions from external threats must be simultaneous and mutually reinforcing if either endeavor is to succeed.

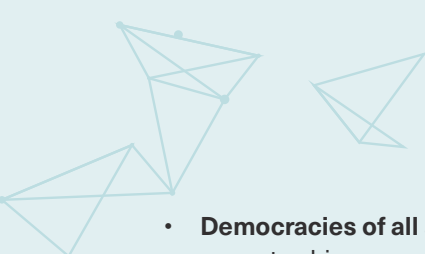
**Halting a debilitating cycle.** Authoritarian powers’ compromising activities in the media, education, commercial, and technology sectors, among others, amount to a constant probing of a given democracy’s integrity. In the absence of necessary adaptations and reforms by the targeted country, authoritarian influence can stimulate a debilitating cycle of democratic deterioration and further exploitation.

- **Media:** Disruptions to the information ecosystem during the digital age have helped authoritarians’ preferred narratives gain traction in settings around the world. Financial pressures that media outlets face in many settings can render them vulnerable to different forms of economic manipulation and coercion. Budget constraints often make it difficult for media outlets—especially those in emerging or weakened democracies—to retain reporters with dedicated expertise. This dynamic can generate asymmetries in the knowledge and resource base that local outlets can dedicate to reporting on engagement with authoritarian regimes, creating a vacuum in local reporting that authoritarian state media outlets seek to fill through direct and indirect means.
  - **Knowledge Sector:** Authoritarian regimes’ sharp power initiatives in the knowledge sector aim to compromise the systems that facilitate the exchange of ideas, while appropriating knowledge-generating institutions, to the extent that they are permitted to do so, as their own platforms of influence. Shrinking space for independent intellectual inquiry within authoritarian settings such as China, Russia, Turkey, and Hungary has had significant international repercussions.
  - **Technology:** The globally connected digital environment gives authoritarians a means to extend their reach into open societies. Technological innovations and platforms that are developed within open, democratic settings feature considerable vulnerabilities of their own, but an additional threat arises from the rapid diffusion of new platforms that were incubated within authoritarian settings. The authoritarians have become purposeful in their development of technology and the ways in which it is structured and employed. Democracies must be similarly purposeful in crafting rules for emerging technologies that are informed by their own governing principles.
  - **Commerce:** Like all corruption, authoritarian corrosive capital is enabled by a lack of strong legal safeguards and robust accountability and transparency mechanisms. The sharp power effects of corrosive capital generally take the form of “elite capture,” enabling the “repurposing” of local institutions into “instruments of foreign influence.” The authoritarians’ recipe for exercising sharp power through corrosive capital relies not on huge amounts of money, but on strategically focused agreements with well-connected elites and in specific sectors.
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## RECOMMENDATIONS

A response from the full spectrum of institutions within open societies is essential. Governments may be best suited to respond to certain aspects of the sharp power challenge. The methods of authoritarian interference that are covert or coercive may call for the employment of law enforcement or regulatory instruments. But government alone cannot craft an effective defense against the diverse forms of influence that have taken shape in recent years.

- Civil society—broadly understood—is a crucial part of democracies’ competitive advantage over authoritarian states.** In this new environment, a range of actors in the nongovernmental sector—including but not limited to media, universities, publishers, and technology and entertainment firms—must develop strategies for resilience that reinforce standards of openness, accountability, and institutional integrity. Any number of these institutions are increasingly suffering from the effects of sharp power, necessitating a more affirmative and purposeful response.
- Autocrats’ divide-and-conquer methods must be met with democratic unity.** A central feature of authoritarian governance is the divide-and-conquer approach to exercising power. The leaders of critical institutions in democracies should coordinate with one another rather than attempt to grapple with authoritarian pressure on their own. To avoid being exploited as a tool of sharp power, private-sector firms must consider adopting business strategies that do not permit authoritarian regimes to induce the revision of public statements, the sanctioning of employees, the alteration of maps, and the like. The failure to do so will result in a downward spiral of standards that will bolster the autocrats’ strategic advantage.
- In the technology sphere, democracies need to stimulate a race to the top.** Given the degree to which modern technology is shaping the political landscape, democracies must deepen efforts to encourage free expression, integrity of information, and essential privacy safeguards. Platforms that build in surveillance or censorship mechanisms contribute to manipulation of the information environment. We are at an inflection point when it comes to standard setting for powerful emerging technologies. It falls to democratic societies to shape norms concerning the design and use of technology that will protect the free exchange of ideas while also requiring accountability and adherence to human rights.
- Civil society can help address persistent political-literacy gaps regarding China and Russia.** Surge capacity for local civil society expertise is critical to addressing the surprising success of authoritarian sharp power in established and emerging democracies alike. A civil society sector that is knowledgeable on and alert to the risks of engagement with global authoritarian powers can contribute to greater transparency and informed policymaking, and ultimately serve as a vital line of defense that reinforces the institutional integrity of democracies.
- Today’s challenges cannot be viewed as either purely domestic or purely external.** Given the extent to which democracies and autocracies are tethered to each other in key domains such as commerce, education, media, and technology, the challenges to democratic governance that have emerged in recent years can no longer be seen as either entirely domestic or entirely foreign in character. Therefore, refreshing and strengthening critical democratic institutions internally, on the one hand, and safeguarding them from the compromising or corrosive influence of external authoritarian powers, on the other, are not mutually exclusive exercises. In fact, both are at risk of failure if they are not designed to be mutually reinforcing.

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- **Democracies of all stripes have a stake in this struggle.** But if better resourced, more established democracies cannot achieve essential reforms to resist authoritarian influence, it bodes poorly for their more vulnerable counterparts around the world. The reports in this series identify weaknesses in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Bolivia, Nigeria, Portugal, and Serbia. Open societies everywhere are more interconnected with, and vulnerable to, authoritarian systems and ideas than at any other point in the post–Cold War era. Democracies at different levels of development—and at different stages of awareness—will need to share information and expertise in new ways.
  - **Democracies must shift from an awareness-raising phase to more concerted action.** Media and civil society groups play a crucial role in raising public awareness and informing and educating broader constituencies about the nature and tactics of authoritarian influence. In recent years, first-rate research and monitoring efforts have been undertaken to measure the extent of the challenge, and to put important information into the public domain. These efforts are necessary, but insufficient. As the reports in this series observe, an active response is taking shape in certain sectors. For instance, media outlets, civil society groups, and technology enterprises are finding innovative ways to rebuff Beijing’s sharp power intrusions in the media sphere. The countries with the most advanced civil society efforts to investigate, report on, and build understanding about the nature and forms of sharp power, such as Australia, Taiwan, and the Czech Republic, have arguably made the most progress in this respect. Successful measures in individual countries must now be accelerated and scaled up in a concerted fashion by other democracies.

## REPORTS IN THE SHARP POWER AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE SERIES

### **Double-Edged Sword: China’s Sharp Power Exploitation of Emerging Technologies**

by Samantha Hoffman (April 2021)

### **China’s Global Media Footprint: Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence**

by Sarah Cook (February 2021)

### **Commanding Ideas: Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence**

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### **Firming Up Democracy’s Soft Underbelly: Authoritarian Influence and Media Vulnerability**

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**he world has changed in the past decade and a half. During this period, dictatorships have intensified and modernized their repression. Regimes in virtually every region—throughout the Middle East and Eurasia, parts of Asia, and elsewhere—have become more authoritarian.<sup>1</sup> Two major powers in particular, China and Russia, have led the way in tightening their grip domestically, adapting their techniques for a new era, and deploying them abroad to exert international influence and, in effect, make the world safer for autocracy.

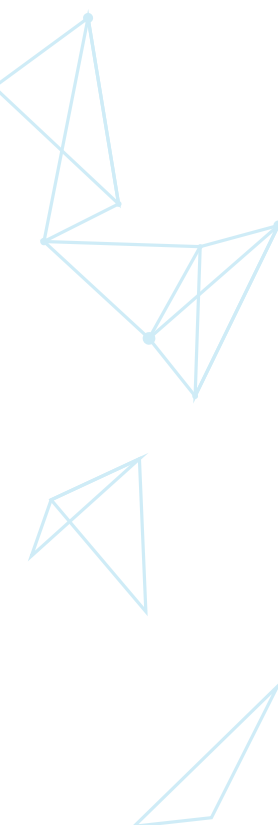
A top priority of these two regimes is to prevent dissent and crush it when necessary. In Beijing's case, the impulse for absolute control is on vivid display in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where the brutalization of the Uyghur people and assiduous efforts to eradicate the Uyghur culture are underway.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has similarly sought to subjugate the people and culture of Tibet.<sup>3</sup> In Hong Kong, Beijing has proceeded with ruthless determination in its deconstruction of the special administrative region's autonomy, rule of law, and semidemocratic political institutions.<sup>4</sup> In these areas and across China, the state increasingly relies on technology to maintain its comprehensive vision of regime security.<sup>5</sup> Thousands of online "speech crimes" have been punished by the ever more vigilant and intolerant authorities.<sup>6</sup>

In Russia, where paramount leader Vladimir Putin has entered his third decade in power, the authorities similarly aim to smother criticism, marshaling all of the instruments of the state to keep the incumbent leadership in control.<sup>7</sup> Since the turn of the century, the Kremlin has steadily tightened the screws on the country's independent media, civil society, key commercial assets, and political opposition. As in China, the authorities in Russia have the ambition to make digital technologies a bulwark of authoritarian rule.<sup>8</sup> In June 2020, for instance, the government signed a contract to install a facial-recognition system called "Orwell" in its more than 43,000 schools, and this is only one of the steps it has taken to massively scale up video surveillance in Russia.<sup>9</sup> The regime's digital surveillance capacity grew substantially in 2020, ostensibly to safeguard public health and safety, but the groundwork was laid well before the pandemic emerged, and these systems will remain in place long after the virus is subdued.<sup>10</sup>

For the authoritarian trendsetters in Beijing and Moscow, as well as other influential autocracies such as the Persian Gulf monarchies, power can be neither shared nor rotated. Rather than viewing criticism and competition as vital corrective mechanisms, these regimes see them as mortal threats. Any crack in their dominance would expose incumbent elites to accountability for decades of accumulated abuses, and the resulting incentive to constantly reinforce and expand their control is playing out across national borders in the present era of globalization.

Meanwhile, in many democratic systems, the safeguards that ensure routine transfers of power and the protection of civil and political rights are eroding. Ambitious leaders and ruling parties that took power through elections, including within advanced democracies, have worked to dismantle institutional checks, restrict independent media and critical speech, and manipulate voting systems—and voters—to entrench themselves in office, effectively steering their countries down an authoritarian path.

To make matters even more challenging, these trends have coincided with a digital media revolution. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were launched in 2004, 2005, and 2006, respectively, and since that time—in addition to their beneficial effects—they have disrupted traditional journalism, fueled political polarization, and provided potent delivery systems for propaganda, disinformation, and extremist views.<sup>11</sup> The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic last year has only accelerated the antidemocratic pattern, providing cover for new repressive measures and discrediting the many democratic governments that mismanaged the crisis.<sup>12</sup>



Today, in 2021, we are confronted with the sobering fact that the current period of democratic decline and authoritarian resurgence now constitutes half of the 30 years since the end of the Cold War. The global political landscape that emerged from the dramatic progress of the 1990s has been profoundly altered.

As we noted in our 2017 report, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, the leading authoritarians' success can be attributed in large part to "their exploitation of a glaring asymmetry: In an era of hyperglobalization, the regimes in Russia and China have raised barriers to external political and cultural influence at home while simultaneously preying upon the openness of democratic systems abroad." In this context, democracy is being challenged on multiple fronts. A striking aspect of the current situation is the extent to which democratic progress or regression is being shaped by both internal and external factors.

As democracies have turned inward, the authoritarians have looked outward. Autocratic powers are exerting their will more vigorously in the Horn of Africa,<sup>13</sup> Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans,<sup>14</sup> Latin America,<sup>15</sup> and throughout Asia.<sup>16</sup> The repressive regimes that have become more internationally assertive are engaged across a wide range of sectors beyond diplomacy, from the media and academia to advanced technology and basic infrastructure. In this environment of pervasive authoritarian influence, societies that aim to democratize, or even to bolster existing democratic systems, face much higher hurdles than they might have in earlier decades.<sup>17</sup>

## AUTOCRACIES AND DEMOCRACIES ARE TETHERED

Today more than at any time in recent memory, there are no bright lines between domestic affairs and international influence. As the reports in this Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series indicate, autocracies and democracies have become tethered to one another in complicated ways that, more often than not, have harmful effects on practices and standards in the democracies.

Episodes that a few years ago could be brushed off as single or random examples of authoritarian overreach are now recognizable as part of a disturbing global pattern. Given the velocity and scope of the changes, and as an outgrowth of its original work on sharp power, the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy undertook a two-year initiative to assess the ways in which modern forms of authoritarian influence are affecting the democratic infrastructure in open societies. As globalization has deepened integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies, including the media and information space, the knowledge sector, norms and standards surrounding emerging technologies, and commerce.

The eight reports in this Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series take a thematic approach, with the aim of systematically analyzing the ways in which leading authoritarian regimes manipulate the political landscape and censor independent expression in democratic settings. They are the result of a series of roundtable discussions and workshops at which leading thinkers, experts, and civil society representatives from around the globe surveyed the vulnerabilities of open societies that authoritarian regimes target and exploit using sharp power tools and identified potential civil society responses that could bolster the integrity of the open public sphere. The analyses in these reports suggests that while democracies may not yet be sufficiently focused on the activities of authoritarian regimes, the authoritarians are intensely interested in the democracies.

A wide range of crucial institutions today have deep relationships across the autocratic-democratic divide. Through these conduits and nodes of shared activity, autocratic powers are recalibrating incentives in ways that conflict with essential standards of democratic accountability. Universities,



publishers, and think tanks in democracies interact with and accept resources from authoritarian sources to an extent that would scarcely have been imaginable even two decades ago. Media and technology-related relationships between democracies and autocracies have proliferated, often skewing the integrity of news and information content and subverting freedom of expression. The extraordinary commercial relationships that have emerged with authoritarian states, China first among them, have opened the door for strategically debilitating forms of corruption in unprepared societies. Professional sports and other entertainment industries have likewise become fair game for authoritarian penetration, with unanticipated consequences for our cultural environment. The cluster of institutions related to information, commerce, media, and technology form an important part of the central nervous system of modern open societies. When this critical system is exposed to malign influence, the adverse reverberations can be profound.

Such vulnerabilities are especially important because, in a twist on expectations, the norms and habits of authoritarian governance have gained strength on a global level. At home, the leaderships in Beijing and Moscow devote their internal security apparatuses and technological acumen to obstructing or coopting the activities of civil society and other independent forces as part of an overall control effort. But the suppression of accountability and pluralism that is central to authoritarian systems has metastasized, spreading across national borders and becoming a powerful obstacle to the global struggle for democracy.

The phenomenon is apparent in a range of international organizations with a mandate to safeguard democracy and human rights standards. Authoritarian powers led by China and Russia are working hard to undercut these entities. They seek to sideline independent groups' participation in the human rights and democracy mechanisms of critical organizations like the United Nations, while otherwise curating the agenda to marginalize discussion of topics that are deemed unwelcome.<sup>18</sup> The aim is not simply to defend authoritarianism at home but to reforge the international norms that stigmatize authoritarian governance.<sup>19</sup> This dedicated effort to rewrite the global rules of the road has matured to the point that authoritarians are using their influence to create their own body of self-serving international law.<sup>20</sup>

## HALTING AN ADVERSE, REINFORCING CYCLE

Authoritarian powers have not been content to meddle with international institutions. At the country level, they have deftly exploited the openness of democratic systems. In fact, their compromising activities in the media, education, and technology sectors, among others, amount to a constant probing of a given democracy's integrity. In the absence of necessary adaptations and reforms by the targeted country, authoritarian influence can stimulate a debilitating cycle of democratic deterioration and further exploitation.

The stakes are high. Crucial governance norms are being contested on an ongoing basis, and powerful signals as to who has the upper hand are being sent through the many interactions between institutions based in autocratic and democratic settings. Far too often, authoritarian standards have been privileged in these interactions, gradually eroding the primacy of democratic principles.

For example, when the Australian public broadcaster drops Chinese-language coverage that is critical of the CCP after entering into an agreement with a Beijing-linked media company, it sends a signal.<sup>21</sup> When independent universities conclude educational agreements with China-based entities that undermine academic freedom, it sends a signal.<sup>22</sup> When major technology firms in open societies bow to pressure from Moscow to acknowledge its territorial claims, it sends a signal.<sup>23</sup> When major entertainment companies rein in content related to Saudi Arabia's rulers to avoid economic repercussions, it sends a signal.<sup>24</sup> When German officials suppress a report

about Beijing's manipulative influence in the country, it sends a signal.<sup>25</sup> As they become more numerous, such episodes of political censorship can reset standards in open societies and clear the way for even more antidemocratic behaviors.<sup>26</sup>

As Glenn Tiffert observes in his report for this series, *Compromising the Knowledge Economy: Authoritarian Challenges to Independent Intellectual Inquiry*, "authoritarian regimes grasp these connections, and are exploiting vulnerabilities in open knowledge economies to discredit democracy as a viable political alternative, shore up their positions at home, and facilitate the projection of their power and interests abroad." In describing the scope of the challenge, Tiffert goes on to say that "the People's Republic of China is in a class by itself by dint of its population and wealth, but others—including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—are also systematically coopting foreign partners, marginalizing or intimidating dissenters, controlling discourses, and globalizing their preferred narratives."<sup>27</sup>

The problem is not simply with a given media agreement or educational exchange program. It centers on the systematic alteration of expectations across a wide range of countries and institutions to suit authoritarian interests, and it has profound implications for the world we live in.

Writing in her report, *Commanding Ideas: Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence*, Nadège Rolland observes that the autocrats' "systematically selective engagement marginalizes entire segments of opinion and overcrowds debate with voices favorable to authoritarian objectives, with a cumulative effect that approximates censorship."<sup>28</sup>

Each think tank director, technology leader, university dean, publishing executive, or media figure who accedes to the tacit or explicit preferences of Beijing or Moscow, for instance on matters related to freedom of expression or freedom of association, contributes to a redrawing of boundaries that reduces respect for fundamental rights. Each incremental move away from democratic standards makes it easier for others to take the next step.

Democracies of all stripes have a stake in this struggle; but if better resourced, more established democracies cannot achieve essential reforms to resist authoritarian influence, it bodes poorly for their more vulnerable counterparts around the world. The reports in this series identify weaknesses in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Bolivia, Nigeria, Portugal, and Serbia. Democracies everywhere are more interconnected with, and vulnerable to, authoritarian systems and ideas than at any other point in the post-Cold War era. The situation demands a far more purposeful response aimed at defending and affirming democratic practices and values.

None of this suggests that authoritarians are omnipotent or infallible. Their typically insecure and deeply corrupt governments are rife with vulnerabilities of their own—and recognizing these shortcomings is important to countering their outward influence. Millions of ordinary people within repressive settings desire greater freedom and struggle to gain it, often demonstrating remarkable courage and taking great personal risks. However, over the past decade and a half, the leading authoritarian regimes have become more ambitious and purposeful, and their activities have already contributed to reduced accountability, narrowing pluralism, and eroding freedom in every region of the globe.

**Democracies of all stripes have a stake in this struggle; but if better resourced, more established democracies cannot achieve essential reforms to resist authoritarian influence, it bodes poorly for their more vulnerable counterparts around the world.**

A commonly heard refrain today is that democracies must “get their own house in order,” but they cannot afford to ignore the world around them while they do so. The authoritarian regimes that have taken advantage of their interactions with democracies and international rules-setting bodies are not likely to retreat or hit a pause button as democracies tend to their domestic difficulties.<sup>29</sup> Efforts by democracies to mend internal weaknesses and protect their institutions from external threats must be simultaneous and mutually reinforcing if either endeavor is to succeed.

## THE COMPROMISING EFFECTS OF SHARP POWER

In recent years, the authorities in China, Russia, and some of the Persian Gulf monarchies have invested massive resources in arenas commonly associated with “soft power,” a term coined by political scientist Joseph Nye. Soft power is based on attraction, arising from the positive appeal of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies—as well as from its independent civil society. The Chinese authorities especially have spent billions of dollars around the world to advance their interests, employing an extensive toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, cultural activities, the development of global media enterprises, and initiatives in the knowledge sector and technology sphere. Investments and activities that looked piecemeal or episodic ten or fifteen years ago now form a striking pattern.

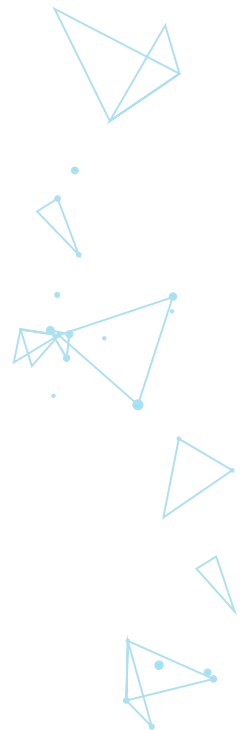
A dilemma has taken shape, however: despite these immense investments, observers wonder why the authoritarian regimes continue to suffer a clear soft-power deficit.<sup>30</sup> China and Russia tend to perform poorly in global public opinion surveys, for example.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, Beijing and Moscow are projecting more influence beyond their borders than at any time in recent memory, and not chiefly through the “hard power” tools of military might or raw economic muscle.

We have contended that the influence in question is better understood as sharp power, an approach that typically involves the subtle penetration and manipulation of targeted countries and institutions. As we wrote in the original *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* report, such initiatives often “are accompanied by an authoritarian determination to monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions.” Fundamentally, sharp power has the effect of limiting free expression, curbing pluralism, and distorting the political environment.<sup>32</sup>

Some observers have equated sharp power with “cyber warfare” or “information warfare.”<sup>33</sup> This would be misleading, however, as sharp power is visible in any number of domains that transcend this narrow-bore definition. As the reports in this series detail, the effects of sharp power can be seen today in the educational and publishing sectors, traditional and newer forms of media, in the technology realm, and in commercial relations with authoritarian regimes. It certainly affects the information landscape, but it also suborns institutions and alters incentives in ways that undercut the essential civil liberties of an open society.

Authoritarian regimes have a point of view and strong preferences about the way the world should be ordered and governed, something that observers in democracies sometimes lose sight of. Autocrats are not agnostic about freedom of expression or association. The organizing principles of these systems require the control of speech and ideas and the elimination of independent groupings or power centers in society. Now, as authoritarian giants like China and Russia work to project their governing principles internationally, democracies are contending with what should be understood as “novel forms of tyranny.”<sup>34</sup>

Much of the analysis on authoritarian regimes in recent years has assumed that they would, like democracies, attempt to accrue international influence by attracting and winning over their interlocutors. But the leaders in Beijing and Moscow are starkly unambiguous in their efforts to rule through strength and fear at home, and people in free societies should open their minds to



the possibility that these regimes are inclined to do the same abroad. Their primary aim is not to earn the love or the votes of foreign audiences, but to corrupt, confuse, intimidate, and control their perceived opponents. This is not soft power. This is something different.

## MANIPULATING THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPHERE

Misplaced assumptions about the ambitions and aims of authoritarian regimes are especially relevant in the media domain. Debates about the effectiveness of authoritarian investments in international state media broadcasts, often viewed through the lens of soft power, have tended to focus on the apparent attractiveness of the content: how many viewers or readers in foreign settings consume the material, and whether there is a measurable improvement in local perceptions of the sponsoring regime according to public opinion polls. Though such assessments are often mixed, many observers predicted that the propaganda and alternative narratives promoted by authoritarian state media would ultimately gain little traction in the context of a competitive marketplace of ideas and information.

But as Edward Lucas raises in his report, *Firming Up Democracy's Soft Underbelly: Authoritarian Influence and Media Vulnerability*, the notion that the best ideas and the most truthful journalism would win the day has not always panned out in practice.<sup>35</sup> The most prized features of the modern, globalized information ecosystem—including competition, openness, and fairmindedness<sup>36</sup>—have paradoxically provided authoritarian regimes with an entry point, allowing them to pierce and perforate it with their own narratives.

In the digital age, media around the world face mounting economic pressures that have severely tested the business models of commercial and independent outlets. Few enterprises have been able to sustain themselves independently through traditional revenue streams, such as reader subscriptions and private advertising. Meanwhile, market competition has increased as the internet and social media have lowered the barriers to entry and allowed new types of actors to operate as information gatekeepers and agenda setters.

It is within this already challenging arena that authoritarian regimes have unleashed their state media outlets, such as RT, Sputnik, Press TV, China Global Television Network (CGTN), and Xinhua, among many others, along with closely aligned private outlets owned by loyal business interests or political elites. Lucas describes how these dynamics have contributed to an environment of “faux-competition,” in which genuinely independent outlets compete with agencies that benefit from government or oligarchic support. Although the problem can be found in virtually every open society, the risks to the integrity of the information environment are greater in younger democracies with less developed media systems. In such settings, there is often a greater chance that foreign authoritarian interests, as expressed through their state media, will be able to cross-pollinate with local media outlets affiliated with powerful, illiberal domestic players, as has been documented in the Western Balkans.<sup>37</sup>

The very openness of democratic societies and their media systems makes them soft targets for the authoritarians. In her report on Beijing's evolving global media influence, Sarah Cook describes how the CCP has developed a wide-ranging toolkit that can distort democratic media environments through propaganda, censorship, disinformation, and control over content delivery systems.<sup>38</sup> Media partnerships between Xinhua or CGTN and both public and private media outlets around the world have yielded content-sharing and coproduction agreements that insinuate the CCP's narratives and Beijing-friendly content relatively seamlessly into local media outlets. As Cook observes, “Most news consumers in these countries are unlikely to note Xinhua's presence in the byline of an article, and even if they do, they may not be aware of the agency's subservience to the CCP.”<sup>39</sup>



Both Lucas and Cook highlight how the financial pressures that media outlets face in many settings can render them vulnerable to different forms of economic manipulation and coercion. In some markets, private-sector firms beholden to Beijing's interests have succeeded in acquiring stakes in existing local outlets or in firms that control media advertising; these in turn have influenced editorial positions on content related to China and effectively resulted in censorship.<sup>40</sup>

Budget constraints often make it difficult for media outlets—especially those in emerging or weakened democracies—to retain reporters with dedicated expertise. This dynamic can generate asymmetries in the knowledge base and resources that local outlets can dedicate to independently reporting on international relations, business deals, and related matters where engagement with authoritarian regimes like China or Russia is concerned. This can create a vacuum in local reporting that is filled by content from authoritarian state media outlets, which become the primary source of news on a country's own national development and international relations. Even in Italy, a wealthy European democracy, a content partnership with the country's top news agency has allowed Xinhua's reporting to dominate search results for Italian-language news about China.<sup>41</sup> Online, international news aggregators provide authoritarian state media with another platform for disseminating content. Reuters Connect, the global news agency's one-stop digital content marketplace, has partnerships with TASS Russian News Agency, Turkey's Anadolu Agency, and China's CCTV and Xinhua.<sup>42</sup> The authoritarians' investments in flooding the international media market with highly coordinated state-sponsored content are also considerable. An analysis by the China Media Project reported approximately 4,500 "media drops" as part of a campaign run by the *People's Daily*; the effort republished 750 unique paid supplements in twelve languages across nearly 200 media outlets based in forty countries, all during the two-week period of the 2021 National People's Congress session.<sup>43</sup>

**The authoritarian tools of media influence have whittled away at the structural integrity of the international media sphere and distorted the very notion of what types of news and information might be perceived as most appealing.**

Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing argue that their state media outlets offer alternative perspectives and therefore have as much right as any other outlet to broadcast into foreign media markets or disseminate content on mainstream social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. But the same regimes deny space for independent media in their domestic markets that might offer a pluralistic alternative to their own citizens, and in recent years they have tightened the screws on international media and information platforms still operating within their borders. Perhaps the most egregious exploitation of democratic systems, as Lucas notes, is the authoritarians' use of "lawfare" to bully independent media outlets into silence, threatening costly slander or libel lawsuits against individual researchers, journalists, editors, and media organizations when they investigate corruption or other sensitive topics.

Over time, the authoritarian tools of media influence have whittled away at the structural integrity of the international media sphere and distorted the very notion of what types of news and information might be perceived as most appealing. For cash-strapped media with overworked editors and reporters, permission to freely republish content from Xinhua or Sputnik is a convenient shortcut that makes their product more valuable, even if it has the effect of compromising the integrity of the local media environment. Where distrust of local media is high because of political polarization, the entrance of seemingly alternative sources of news, such as RT or Press TV, may be more compelling—as suggested by evidence of RT en Español's prior popularity and continued growth among Latin American audiences during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>44</sup> For many consumers with limited options to access news and information—perhaps because few outlets

carry content in their preferred language, or because poverty limits their connectivity and ability to subscribe to paywalled media sources—the service providers that control the most publicly accessible content-delivery systems have the greatest degree of influence. The resulting disruptions to the information ecosystem have helped authoritarians' preferred narratives gain traction in settings around the world.

## RESHAPING THE KNOWLEDGE SECTOR

Much as the media sector has been subjected to new forces of influence that can compromise its integrity, the institutions designed to foster free intellectual inquiry within democratic societies—among them academia, publishers, think tanks, and cultural entities—have been challenged by the effects of sharp power. The knowledge sector should be autonomous, vibrant, and unfettered. But in many democracies, especially those that find themselves increasingly intertwined with authoritarian powers, the freedom of intellectual inquiry is being tested as authoritarians seek to bend the relevant institutions to their will.

The reports in this series by Glenn Tiffert and Nadège Rolland describe how authoritarian regimes' sharp power initiatives in the knowledge sector aim to compromise the systems that facilitate the exchange of ideas, while appropriating knowledge-generating institutions, to the extent that they are permitted to do so, as their own platforms of influence. They achieve their goals by exploiting weaknesses in the economic and technological adaptations that many such institutions have made in an effort to compete in an increasingly crowded global arena.

The age of connectivity and open borders fed the appetite of universities, think tanks, and publishers to integrate themselves into the global marketplace and deepen participation in international exchanges. While openness to new sources of talent and ideas is a critically important feature of free inquiry, many knowledge-sector institutions failed to fully account for the ways in which counterparts in authoritarian settings such as China and Russia—but also Turkey and Hungary, among others—have been subjected to increasing regulation and political oversight by their governments, as Tiffert explains in his report. The shrinking space for independent intellectual inquiry within these countries has had significant international repercussions.

A good deal of the challenge arises from a lack of preparedness. Tiffert describes how many institutions do not fully interrogate the nature of the relationships they establish with partners in closed settings: “When democratic institutions that are integral to an open knowledge economy, such as universities and publishers, partner with entities based in authoritarian states, they expose themselves to perils that traditional due diligence and risk management frameworks were not designed to negotiate. Most fundamentally, these institutions cannot assume that their partners share their core values.”<sup>45</sup> The tendency to underestimate risk, according to Rolland, can be attributed in part to the linguistic phenomenon of “faux amis,” or “false friends”—in this case, organizations founded or controlled by authoritarians introducing themselves using terms like “think tank” that have very different meanings in a democracy. Such organizations are ultimately shaped by regimes that “repress any form of dissent and claim control over the discursive and ideational space, undercutting the pretense of parity with their democratic counterparts.”<sup>46</sup> The authoritarians' purpose in permitting such international partnerships, she writes, is to “seek to engineer a perception of global support for their political system and to shape a landscape that will be more favorable to their policies, talking points, and version of the truth.”<sup>47</sup>

Many universities, publishers, and think tanks in open societies rely on economic resources and collaboration from abroad to boost their own knowledge-generation capacity and prestige, and repressive regimes have identified that reliance as a relatively open conduit for influence. Among the examples that Tiffert highlights are universities in Australia and Germany that entered into

written funding agreements with the Confucius Institute Headquarters—the Ministry of Education entity in Beijing that governed Confucius Institute operations at the time. These deals obligated the signing universities to comply with China’s laws and submit to a China-based tribunal in the event of a dispute.<sup>48</sup>

Authoritarian-sponsored initiatives in the knowledge sector often appeal to individuals’ and institutions’ desire to increase access to foreign elites and international forums through partnerships and exchange opportunities. For instance, the Kremlin-supported Valdai Discussion Club and the Rhodes Forum (organized by Putin ally Vladimir Yakunin’s Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute), convene by invitation only on an annual basis and boast the participation of various foreign political leaders and academic researchers from Russia and prestigious universities around the world.<sup>49</sup> The China-CEEC Think Tanks Network and the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum are incorporated into Beijing’s regional engagement platforms, the 17+1 Initiative between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), respectively.

Such inducements provide the authoritarians with leverage that can be used to achieve censorship, both passively and proactively. Individual scholars concerned about obtaining visas to conduct field research or maintaining important contacts in a particular closed setting may self-censor their public comments or alter their research plans. Universities, think tanks, and publishing houses may decline to organize or cancel discussions and publications dealing with topics that are deemed sensitive by the authorities in Moscow, Ankara, or Beijing if they believe funding, partnerships, or market access could be at risk.<sup>50</sup> As concerning as these situations are, some foreign academics have faced much more serious repercussions after publishing critical research about authoritarian regimes. The reprisals can include legal harassment and physical intimidation even for those based in democratic settings,<sup>51</sup> malicious online disinformation campaigns,<sup>52</sup> or outright detention for those conducting academic work in an authoritarian country.<sup>53</sup> While such direct threats against foreign academics have been sporadic and, in some cases, seemingly arbitrary, they have certainly had a chilling effect on free intellectual inquiry overall.

In addition to deterring and censoring certain research, sharp power initiatives in the knowledge sector—such as the creation of authoritarian think tanks and institutional networks as described by Rolland—fill the resulting voids by amplifying the sponsoring regimes’ preferred narratives. Further corrosive impact is made possible by the knowledge sector’s increasing reliance on technological innovations, which have the potential to become a “devastating force multiplier” by enabling authoritarian regimes to manipulate digitized historical archives and other information repositories at the source, according to Tiffert.<sup>54</sup>

Taken together, these efforts to amplify the ideas preferred by authoritarian powers, on the one hand, while sidelining those they deem undesirable, on the other, can exert a powerful systemic effect on the dissemination of ideas, intellectual pluralism, and freedom of expression more generally.

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## EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES' RISKY AFFORDANCES

Until the past decade, the dominant assumption was that digital communications technologies would enable more freedom. While this has been borne out in certain respects, there was a profound underestimation of the extent to which the powerful technologies would offer authoritarian regimes certain advantages, serve to promote authoritarian practices,<sup>55</sup> and even enable the creation of hidden systems of control.

The technological innovations and platforms that are developed within open, democratic settings feature considerable vulnerabilities of their own, but as the reports in this series by Samantha Hoffman and Nicholas D. Wright explain, an additional threat arises from the rapid diffusion of new platforms that were incubated within authoritarian settings.<sup>56</sup> For instance, the popular video-sharing application TikTok has become more globally prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>57</sup> and reports over the past year have pointed to efforts by its Beijing-based, Cayman Islands–incorporated parent company to shape its content in line with the political sensitivities of the CCP.<sup>58</sup> Of even greater concern is the growing international popularity of the multipurpose communications app WeChat, owned by parent company Tencent, which more overtly censors political speech, spreads misinformation, and lacks critical transparency.<sup>59</sup> A report released in May 2020 by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab revealed how WeChat, which has more than one billion users globally, closely monitors foreign users in order to fine-tune censorship capabilities within China.<sup>60</sup>

These developments are important for freedom of expression and the health of democratic systems because the globally connected digital environment gives authoritarians a ready means to extend their reach into open societies. The regimes in China and Russia in particular have a keen appreciation of information as a source of power and have made this domain a priority.<sup>61</sup>

Beijing has been uniquely determined and active in its campaign to shape the structural underpinnings of the international technological environment—including hardware, software, technical standards, and the norms and conceptual framing of crucial tech-related debates. The CCP, for example, has worked to influence rule-making bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). At the ITU, Chinese tech firms have put forward proposals that could establish international standards on the specifications and uses of facial-recognition and surveillance systems. If ratified, such standards would likely be adopted by many developing countries. Chinese companies have also presented forward-leaning research on standards for a New IP (internet protocol)

system, in line with the Chinese government's view that designing the digital architecture should be a core part of its foreign policy.<sup>62</sup> The implementation of such a proposal could make it easier for national governments to control access.<sup>63</sup>

The Russian authorities also are reshaping the rules. Customers in Latin America, the Middle East, and especially Eurasia are patronizing Russian technology companies whose offerings include digital surveillance systems based on Russia's own SORM (System of Operative Search Measures).<sup>64</sup> Given the pace of change in the international standard-setting and rule-making field, civil society should proactively contribute to the transparency and oversight of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) in international and regional fora, as Wright argues in his report, *Artificial Intelligence and Democratic Norms*.<sup>65</sup>

**The globally connected digital environment gives authoritarians a ready means to extend their reach into open societies.**

In fact, any distinctions that might once have existed between different tech sectors like social media, AI, and digital surveillance are quickly being erased. Hoffman observes that the CCP has



been building an increasingly seamless synthesis of consumer convenience, surveillance, and censorship,<sup>66</sup> as exemplified by such all-encompassing platforms as WeChat, which appeals to users by fusing messaging, online-payment, and many other functions but also includes politicized content restrictions and features that lend themselves to surveillance.<sup>67</sup> Now prevalent within China, this technological model is increasingly being tailored for other societies.<sup>68</sup> Surveillance is integral to China's outward-facing tech engagement. The party-state has made a long-term investment in its surveillance arsenal, honing its tools for keeping citizens under watch in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>69</sup> As Beijing deepens its AI capacities, including through massive data collection,<sup>70</sup> it is likely to apply more precise instruments for what the CCP calls social management, including systems for predicting individual behavior and collective action.

The authoritarians have become purposeful in their development of technology and the ways in which it is structured and employed. Democracies must be similarly purposeful in crafting rules for emerging technologies that are informed by their own governing principles. Hoffman explains that when these technologies are adopted in places where civil society and government oversight are not strong, they can actually facilitate the closing of civic space and the normalization of authoritarian values. In young democracies in Africa, for instance, Chinese firms selling surveillance systems emphasize security and safety in their pitch to local officials, while ignoring civil liberties, privacy rights, and due process safeguards.<sup>71</sup> Concerns have also been raised about potential surveillance capabilities embedded in the telecommunications infrastructure that Chinese companies have put in place across Africa.<sup>72</sup>

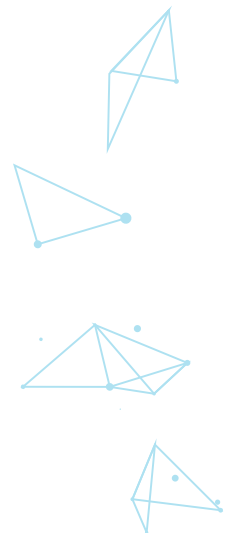
Should the largest authoritarian states, which operate domestically on the basis of censorship and information manipulation,<sup>73</sup> gain further influence over the systems through which people around the world share and receive information, even more extensive forms of what might be understood as “authoritarian curation” are likely to arise. The threat involves not simply curation of speech and information, but the proliferation of technological norms and systems that buttress authoritarian actors and practices across a whole range of areas, including the application of digital methods of control to physical spaces.

This is no theoretical threat. Already, authoritarian regimes such as those in Russia and China have likely succeeded far beyond their own expectations in adapting modern technologies to their own ends. Their playbook includes manipulating debate on dominant social media platforms through computational propaganda,<sup>74</sup> as well as using digital censorship techniques to restrict access to information at the source.<sup>75</sup> These methods have come into play in the past year as China's authorities suppressed critical information in the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>76</sup> and as Moscow and Beijing amplified conspiracy theories and promoted state-media propaganda designed to undermine confidence in democratic institutions abroad.

## COMMERCE AS A VECTOR FOR POLITICAL MANIPULATION

The extraordinary growth of international trade and investment is one of the defining features of the era of globalization, and it should come as no surprise that authoritarian powers seek to leverage their participation in this domain to expand their sharp power influence. Increased capital flows from autocracies have intensified governance challenges in recipient countries, and new, often more sophisticated forms of strategic corruption have emerged.

In his report, *A New Invisible Hand: Authoritarian Corrosive Capital and the Repurposing of Democracy*, Martin Hála observes that the “original assumption that capital flows in and from postcommunist states would primarily be directed by the invisible hand of the market, as in other capitalist economies, has not been borne out.”<sup>77</sup> He explains that unlike garden-variety forms of corruption, corrosive capital and strategic corruption are “backed, and sometimes orchestrated, by a state power for political rather than economic goals—or to advance a comprehensive



authoritarian agenda with inseparable political and economic objectives.” While corrosive capital can enter a society in many forms, Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov argue in their report, *Deals in the Dark: Russian Corrosive Capital in Latin America*, that it most often follows three patterns, with opacity surrounding the negotiation and terms of each deal remaining a common feature: (1) authoritarian state-sponsored loans that mimic traditional development assistance; (2) support for large-scale infrastructure projects that rope countries into long-term, lopsided relationships; and (3) foreign direct investment by nominally private firms that are ultimately linked to an authoritarian state-backed entity or a business magnate allied with authoritarian leadership.<sup>78</sup>

Like all corruption, authoritarian corrosive capital is enabled by a lack of strong legal safeguards and robust accountability and transparency mechanisms. Established democracies and their private sectors are still coming to grips with the threat posed by strategic corruption;<sup>79</sup> democracies with less developed institutional frameworks for preventing corruption and providing transparency are at even greater risk.

As the reports by Hála and by Stefanov and Vladimirov demonstrate, corrosive capital can be difficult to track precisely because the relationships between business entities based in authoritarian settings and their respective governments are not always clear. Post-Cold War market reforms in Russia and China resulted in a concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group of business elites who are expected to serve the interests of the political leadership when called upon. The methods of “state capture” that Stefanov and Vladimirov observe at “the heart of the Kremlin’s strategy for international influence” merely reflect an outward application of the collusive corruption that oligarchs and government officials mastered while building their own power and influence at home. Such relationships can be hidden in plain sight, note Stefanov and Vladimirov, when business entities appear to be “a natural, formally legal part of the economic or governance system.” The openness of the international financial system also makes it possible to obscure linkages to authoritarian actors by routing funds through third countries where a firm may be registered under an anonymous beneficial ownership account.

The sharp power effects of corrosive capital generally take the form “elite capture,” enabling what Hála describes as the “repurposing” of local institutions into “instruments of foreign influence.”<sup>80</sup> Elite capture occurs through the cultivation of relationships by authoritarian regimes and their proxies with counterparts in open societies, who anticipate that deeper engagement will yield generous economic investments and benefits for their constituents. Hála recounts how the chairman of the now-defunct CEFC China Energy, Ye Jianming, developed such close relations with top leaders in the Czech Republic that President Miloš Zeman made him an honorary adviser shortly after the company established a European headquarters in the country. Although CEFC and its chairman were later undone by allegations of corruption within China, Zeman has continued to promote closer ties to Beijing, often putting himself at odds with the policy preferences and security concerns expressed by other parts of the Czech government.<sup>81</sup>

Elite capture also facilitates the circumvention of established public procurement and review mechanisms that are designed to promote transparency and provide accountability. For example, Stefanov and Vladimirov highlight an agreement between the Russian state-owned energy company Rosatom and the Bolivian government to build a Nuclear Research and Technology Center (NRTC) in the city of El Alto. The agreement moved forward without the legally required review and approval by the Bolivian legislature, and a new government entity, the Bolivian Atomic Energy Agency, was hastily established around the deal. Construction at the NRTC site was permitted to begin without a required feasibility study conducted in advance, and it apparently continued even after a new government decided to suspend the project.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the case studies by Hála on China’s corrosive capital in the Czech Republic, and by Stefanov and Vladimirov on Russia’s economic interests in Argentina and Bolivia, are their illustrations of how such authoritarian actors can penetrate and corrode

independent institutions with relatively modest investments. In all three of these country examples, the funds flowing from the authoritarian investor were ultimately minimal and failed to place China (in the case of the Czech Republic) and Russia (in the cases of Argentina and Bolivia) among the top sources of foreign direct investment.

The authoritarians' recipe for exercising sharp power through corrosive capital relies not on huge amounts of money, but on strategically focused agreements with well-connected elites and in specific sectors—such as energy, infrastructure, and real estate—that tend to “lock target countries into a long-term, asymmetrical economic relationship that can be leveraged for future political influence,” as Stefanov and Vladimirov explain. Such investments not only increase risks to the rule of law and the integrity of democratic institutions, but also cultivate local partners who can continue to serve authoritarian interests after the initial project is complete.

## SHARP POWER IN ENTERTAINMENT: SPORTS, HOLLYWOOD, AND THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

### SPORTS

As with the media and academia, authoritarian states have increasingly invested resources in the domain of international sports, and the compromising effects of their efforts are becoming more apparent. The influence of these regimes is especially visible when professional sports teams and players run afoul of political sensitivities in their public remarks.

For example, shortly after Hao Runze, a Chinese-born player for the Serbian soccer team Radnički Niš, criticized the CCP in advance of the June 2020 anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, he was released from his team—reportedly under pressure from Beijing.<sup>82</sup> A similar instance occurred in the United Kingdom, when soccer star Mesut Özil of the London-based team Arsenal spoke out on social media about the Chinese authorities' brutal repression of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. Just a few days later, the Premier League's Chinese broadcast partners abstained from airing an Arsenal match. Özil's avatar was subsequently removed from a video game in China, and when internet users in the country looked up his name, search engines generated error messages. Eager to avoid the loss of its largest foreign market, the Premier League moved to distance itself from the player's comments and excluded him from merchandise celebrating the Lunar New Year. In effect, as with other figures and issues that the CCP deems out of bounds, Mesut Özil was deliberately “being erased.”<sup>83</sup>

Even lower-profile sporting events are not immune from the Chinese authorities' relentless ambition to censor speech on topics they deem off limits. In the summer of 2018, an “obscure soccer tournament modeled on the World Cup” in London, with teams “drawn from a hodgepodge of minority peoples, isolated territories and would-be nations,” was the target of an effort to exclude a team representing Tibet. To the tournament organizer's credit, it refused to buckle and kept the Tibetans on the program.<sup>84</sup>

The most prominent recent case in the United States centered on the National Basketball Association (NBA). Daryl Morey, who at the time was the general manager of the Houston Rockets, expressed support on social media for prodemocracy protesters in Hong Kong in 2019, prompting Chinese companies to withdraw sponsorship for Morey's team. Chinese state media stopped airing NBA games, and the NBA commissioner later said the Chinese government had pressed the league to terminate Morey's employment.<sup>85</sup> He eventually stepped down as the Rockets' manager in late 2020. Further research revealed that an online troll campaign had targeted Morey with the intent of manipulating online discussion about the Hong Kong protests.<sup>86</sup> Separately, in early 2021, the NBA was at risk of being drawn into the controversy over Xinjiang as foreign brands faced international pressure to cut commercial ties with the region and Chinese companies, and consumers threatened to retaliate against any that did so.<sup>87</sup>

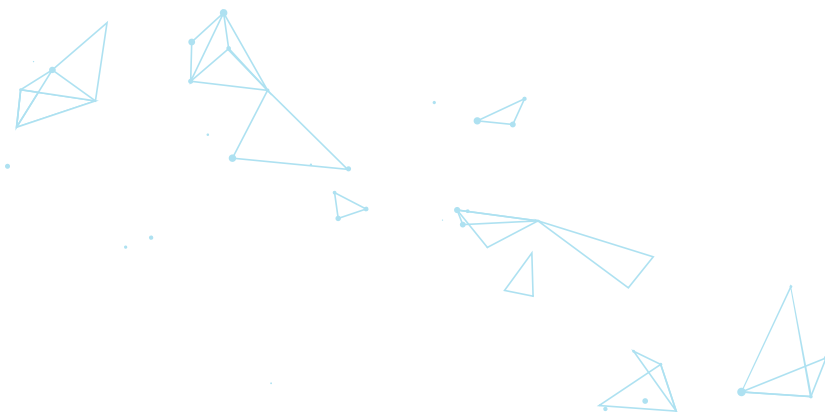
## FILM, TELEVISION, AND VIDEO GAMES

Authoritarian powers are playing a larger role in the global film industry. Audiences in China's enormous market are among the most sought after in the world, giving Beijing leverage that has allowed it to extend de facto state censorship into the production of American movies.<sup>88</sup> Hollywood, traditionally a soft-power asset of the United States, is becoming an instrument through which the CCP can advance its own views and cultural influence. U.S. filmmakers have been induced to avoid taboo topics, change scenes for a given film's release in China, or grant favors or preferential treatment so that Beijing's censors will allow content that might otherwise have been banned.<sup>89</sup>

Among many other examples in recent years, the creators of the 2015 U.S. movie *Pixels* removed a scene depicting an alien attack on the Great Wall of China, but retained scenes of attacks on other iconic sites around the world. For the 2016 Marvel Studios movie *Doctor Strange*, the filmmakers altered a character who was of Tibetan background in the original comic book, recasting the character as Celtic and hiring a white actor.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, the Chinese authorities' censorship of Hollywood films is only one aspect of a larger surge in authoritarian influence within the global entertainment industry. Saudi Arabia, despite its leadership's documented role in the horrific murder of U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, is poised to pour more extensive resources into Hollywood through its Public Investment Fund.<sup>91</sup> Film and television executives in open societies have already apparently self-censored to avoid drawing the ire of Saudi authorities. For example, Netflix complied with a request to withhold an episode of comedian and commentator Hasan Minhaj's *Patriot Act* from subscribers based in Saudi Arabia, after officials there charged that Minhaj's discussion of Khashoggi infringed on a national cybercrime law. Furthermore, the director of a documentary about Khashoggi, *The Dissident*, said that Saudi influence had created major obstacles for the film's distribution.<sup>92</sup>

The lucrative and popular video game industry has not been overlooked by repressive regimes. For instance, U.S.-based Riot Games was criticized for playing to Beijing's political priorities in 2019, when *League of Legends* players found that its online forums blocked terms such as "Uyghur," "Tiananmen," "Great Firewall," and more. Also that year, the U.S. game company Blizzard Entertainment suspended Hearthstone tournament victor Chung "Blitzchung" Ng Wai and denied him his prize money after he expressed support for prodemocracy protesters in Hong Kong during an interview.





## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In our 2017 report, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, we contended that authoritarian regimes, led by Beijing and Moscow, had refined their efforts to “develop a much more powerful array of influence techniques suitable for a modern environment.” The result is an increasingly perilous situation for democracy and democratic standards. The analyses in the Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series, produced as an outgrowth of the original report, describe the extent to which authoritarian regimes have become active and purposeful transnational forces that are able to influence open societies and their institutions.

In some key respects, the autocrats’ multidimensional engagement is overloading democracies’ ability to manage the challenge. In pivotal domains, including the education and publishing sectors, traditional and new media, emerging technology, and the commercial realm, repressive regimes have taken the initiative and successfully shaped incentives and disincentives affecting fields of activity that are crucial to the integrity of democratic systems.

Years ago, at the outset of this deeper and wide-ranging engagement between autocracies and democracies, policymakers in the latter grossly underestimated the determination of authoritarian powers and their capacity to alter and reforge international norms and institutions. During a period in which democracies have been preoccupied with their own internal problems, the authoritarian regimes in Russia, China, and other countries have pushed boundaries and successfully exploited the vulnerabilities of democratic systems. The sharp power challenges have progressively swelled, and patterns of compromising influence are now increasingly visible around the world. Given the scale and complexity of this threat, the response from democracies will need to be both innovative and enduring.

Participation by the full spectrum of institutions within open societies is essential. Governments may be best suited to respond to certain aspects of the sharp power challenge; the methods of authoritarian interference that are covert or coercive may call for the employment of law enforcement or regulatory instruments. But government alone cannot craft an effective defense against the diverse forms of influence that have taken shape in recent years. Authoritarian actors have developed extensive and complex relationships with open societies, engaging in a considerable range of activity that may compromise or corrode crucial standards and norms, including those relating to free expression and association. Because these efforts affect a broad swath of nongovernmental institutions, those same institutions must form part of the democratic response. In short, the independent civil society sector, which authoritarians view as a weak point, should be recognized as one of democracy’s great strengths and mobilized accordingly.

The following insights should be taken into account by democracies’ civil society institutions as they work to retake the initiative and meet the authoritarian challenge:

**The independent civil society sector, which authoritarians view as a weak point, should be recognized as one of democracy’s great strengths and mobilized accordingly.**

**Civil society—broadly understood—is a crucial part of democracies’ competitive advantage over authoritarian states.** In this new environment, a range of actors in the nongovernmental sector—including but not limited to media, universities, publishers, and technology and entertainment firms—must develop strategies for resilience that reinforce standards of openness, accountability, and institutional integrity. Any number of these institutions are increasingly suffering from the effects of sharp power, necessitating a more affirmative and purposeful response.

- Key nongovernmental organizations must factor in the nonfinancial costs of financial engagement with authoritarian regimes. Universities and think tanks that neglect due diligence measures and accept resources from individuals and entities linked to the authorities in such places as Baku, Abu Dhabi, or Riyadh, or that establish partnerships with perceived counterparts in Russia and China, may put their independence and reputation at risk.
- To avoid being exploited as a tool of sharp power, private-sector firms must consider adopting business strategies that do not permit authoritarian regimes to induce the revision of public statements, the sanctioning of employees, the alteration of maps, and the like. Failure to do so could result in a downward spiral of standards that would bolster the autocrats' strategic advantage, and may degrade the characteristics—such as creativity, authenticity, and integrity—that make a particular brand or service desirable to consumers in the first place. Businesses should weigh the reputational risks associated with censored content and be mindful of the fact that authoritarian governments' demands do not necessarily reflect the interests and preferences of ordinary citizens.

**Autocrats' divide-and-conquer methods must be met with democratic unity.** A central feature of authoritarian governance is the divide-and-conquer approach to exercising power. Like all authoritarian regimes, Moscow and Beijing pit domestic groups against one another and encourage cleavages as a method of preventing strong challenges to their position. They do the same at the international level, and to the extent that they are successful, the practice places democracies at a clear disadvantage and weakens their resolve. The leaders of critical institutions in democracies—publishers, media executives, university administrators—should coordinate with one another rather than attempt to grapple with authoritarian pressure on their own.

- In one recent example of such coordination, an attempt by the CCP in spring 2021 to censor think tanks and individual scholars via sanctions resulted in the issuance of joint statements of solidarity by a range of organizations and individuals.<sup>93</sup> Such responses, while welcome and laudable, would be far more potent if they were the outcome of a sustained, organized effort to set expectations and standards *in advance* of pressure from the CCP or other authoritarian forces.
- Democratic institutions need to reshape incentives that over time have been warped to enable the corrosion of essential standards. As part of their collective action, entities like universities, publishers, think tanks, technology firms, media organizations, and entertainment companies should ensure that they do not allow authoritarian powers or their surrogates to define the boundaries of freedom of expression or association. Instead, institutions in democracies should affirmatively lay out their commitment to democratic standards of accountability and human rights, and let these guide their decisions on engagement with authoritarian actors.
- As reports in this series note, other forms of unity should be pursued in the media domain, for instance an agreement among editors not to accept advertorials from repressive state actors. Similarly, the academic, publishing, and think tank sectors should devise shared industry guidelines to avoid ad hoc concessions and send clear signals on their own principles. Any lack of solidarity will weaken their bargaining power and expose them to predatory brinksmanship and intimidation.<sup>94</sup>

**In the technology sphere, democracies need to stimulate a race to the top.** Given the degree to which modern technology is shaping the political landscape, democracies must deepen efforts to encourage free expression, integrity of information, and essential privacy safeguards. Platforms that build in surveillance or censorship mechanisms contribute to manipulation of the information

environment. We are at an inflection point when it comes to standard setting for powerful emerging technologies. It falls to democratic societies to shape norms concerning the design and use of technology that will protect the free exchange of ideas while also requiring accountability and adherence to human rights.

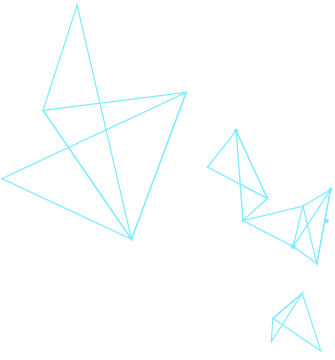
- Support for collaboration between civil society and technology firms is needed to develop resilience in this sector. Civil society can work to correct market failures—like the privileging of advertising and marketing tools over individual privacy—by giving citizens the means to resist mass surveillance and other abuses while preserving the essential openness of the information environment.<sup>95</sup>
- Norm setting and technical standardization of emerging technologies such as “smart cities,” the Internet of Things, and AI occur through their design and adoption within different countries and at the global level. Civil society should promote transparent, multistakeholder governance at international standard-setting bodies and support accountability mechanisms that encourage democratic practices and respect for individual privacy.
- Civil society must play a meaningful role in entities such as the ITU, the ISO, and the International Electrotechnical Commission. They must help shape standards for technologies like fifth-generation (5G) wireless networks and the Internet of Things and work to counter authoritarian standard-setting efforts. Civil society organizations should focus in particular on the development of standards for technologies that may negatively affect civil liberties, like facial- or voice-recognition systems.<sup>96</sup>

#### **Civil society can help address persistent political-literacy gaps regarding China and Russia.**

Surge capacity for local civil society expertise is critical to addressing the surprising success of authoritarian sharp power in established and emerging democracies alike. A civil society sector that is knowledgeable on and alert to the risks of engagement with global authoritarian powers can contribute to greater transparency and informed policymaking, and ultimately serve as a vital line of defense that reinforces the institutional integrity of democracies.

- Given the global ambitions of Beijing and Moscow, an understanding of their influence efforts needs to be mainstreamed into nongovernmental work related to media freedom, free expression, and internet freedom. As the reports in the series observe, such a comprehensive mainstreaming strategy should build on existing initiatives and include the following elements: investigation and research, action by media outlets, initiatives by journalists' unions and media owner associations, and civil society advocacy and programmatic work. To accelerate democratic learning, think tanks and civil society organizations with more advanced capacity could also be more proactive in engaging with rising think tank and civil society professionals in settings where expertise and opportunities for independent study of China and Russia have been more scarce.
- The Russian and Chinese regimes each tend to follow similar patterns across the countries where they deploy corrosive capital to exert political influence. Civil society activists, think tank analysts, and investigative journalists who understand the complex relationships between these authoritarian regimes and their proxies will be better equipped to follow financial flows and study negotiations, agreements, and transactions in their own local settings for potential corruption and elite capture by interests linked to Moscow, Beijing, and others. Cooperation among civil society groups at the regional and international level can accelerate pattern recognition and enhance familiarity with authoritarian powers' preferred methods.<sup>97</sup>

**Democracies of all stripes are together in this high-stakes struggle.** If wealthier, more established democracies cannot achieve essential reforms to manage the compromising effects of sharp power influence, it bodes poorly for the younger democracies that today face similar and growing challenges from globally active authoritarian states.

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- Interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaborations will be a crucial means of accelerating and diffusing learning within and among democracies. Given the broad scope of sharp power influence, various sectors in civil society must learn from the experiences of others to recognize vulnerabilities. Researchers, analysts, and activists with different sets of expertise and based in different geographical settings can stimulate knowledge generation and identify effective resilience measures by exchanging ideas and learning from one another.
  - As part of such an effort, democracies at different levels of development—and at different stages of awareness—will need to share information and expertise in new ways. Democratic societies will also need to constantly reevaluate and calibrate responses to sharp power influence based on adaptations in the authoritarians' strategies.

**Today's challenges cannot be viewed as either purely domestic or purely external.** Given the extent to which democracies and autocracies are tethered to each other in key domains such as commerce, education, media, and technology, the challenges to democratic governance that have emerged in recent years can no longer be seen as either entirely domestic or entirely foreign in character. Therefore, refreshing and strengthening critical democratic institutions internally, on the one hand, and safeguarding them from the compromising or corrosive influence of external authoritarian powers, on the other, are not mutually exclusive exercises. In fact, both are at risk of failure if they are not designed to be mutually reinforcing.

**Democracies must shift from an awareness-raising phase to more concerted action.** The media and civil society groups can play a critical role in raising public awareness and informing and educating broader constituencies about the nature and tactics of authoritarian influence. In recent years, first-rate research, analysis, and monitoring efforts have been undertaken to measure the extent of the challenge, and to put important information into the public domain. These efforts are necessary, but insufficient. As the reports in the series observe, an active response is taking shape in certain sectors. For instance, media outlets, think tanks, civil society groups, and technology companies are finding innovative ways to rebuff Beijing's sharp power intrusions in the media sphere.<sup>98</sup> The countries with the most advanced civil society efforts to investigate, report on, and build understanding about the nature and forms of authoritarian sharp power, such as Australia, Taiwan, and the Czech Republic, have arguably made the most progress in this respect. Successful measures in individual countries must now be accelerated and scaled up in a concerted fashion by other democracies.

The reports in this series collectively describe how authoritarian encroachments have gathered momentum in multiple domains that are crucial to the health of open societies, including mass media, the knowledge sector, the technology sphere, and private-sector commerce. The targeting of democracies' critical institutions, and of democracy as such, is a central feature of the modern social and political landscape. Safeguarding democracy and its institutions should consequently be viewed as a top strategic priority for all those who benefit from their continued survival.



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